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Biden, Legislators, Advocates announce legislation that enhances protections for crime victims

Dover – Attorney General Beau Biden, a bi-partisan group of legislators, and the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council today unveiled legislation that expands current protections for victims and witnesses and streamlines their ability to keep their street address confidential by creating Delaware's Address Confidentiality Program.

"The safety, and often the lives, of victims, witnesses, and their families depend on their ability to stay hidden from their attackers," Attorney General Biden stated. "In this age when many public records are accessible through a simple internet search, this legislation provides survivors with a necessary tool to keep their address secret from those who have targeted them and to help them reclaim their privacy and rebuild their lives."

Senate Majority Leader Patricia Blevins, a longtime champion of protections for victims of domestic violence, said the new legislation provides an important safeguard for victims who are trying to rebuild their lives. "Having a protected address gives invaluable protection to vulnerable people who are trying to pick themselves up and rebuild their lives," said Blevins, D-Elsmere. "It's something that I hope moves quickly to the governor's desk."

The Address Confidentiality Act amends Delaware's witness protection law to allow domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking, as well as those in the witness protection program, to apply for a Post Office Box address. Participants would use this P.O. Box as their address for registration, employment, billing, governmental, and other personal matters. Under the legislation, participants' street addresses would be disclosed only to law enforcement when it is necessary in an emergency.

Rep. Michael Barbieri is the lead House sponsor of the legislation. "These people are victimized over and over again, their sense of security stripped away," said Barbieri, D-Newark. "A relentless perpetrator will continuously try to track the victims down, so anything we can do to shelter and protect them from the perpetrator is a necessary and prudent step."

State Representative Deborah D. Hudson (R-Fairthorne), a prime sponsor of the bill, said, "This legislation provides another important component in helping victims of violent crimes in Delaware, and in particular domestic violence victims, get the added protections they desperately deserve from the state. Delaware's Address Confidentiality Program is a common sense approach to ensuring that a victim's identity is protected and that their address will not end up in the hands of the public, or even worse, in their perpetrator's possession. I look forward to enacting this bill as soon as possible. We should not delay in taking the necessary legislative action that will make this bill the law in Delaware."

The Address Confidentiality Program would be run by the Attorney General's Victim Witness Assistance Program at no cost to participants, and parents and guardians could apply on behalf of minors or incapacitated individuals. Similar programs have already been adopted in 17 other states.

"This will give us another way to help shield victims as they rebuild their lives," said Senate Minority Whip Liane Sorenson, R-Hockessin. "It has proven effective elsewhere and I hope that when it becomes law, it will prove equally effective here."

Today's legislation follows an effort last year by Attorney General Biden, Governor Markell, legislators, and the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council to strengthen Protection from Abuse Orders. House Bill 336, signed into law last July, allows Family Court to extend the "no contact" provision of a PFA to two years and, in egregious cases, allows no contact provisions to be in effect for life.

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